

## Day of the Dead (Dia de Muertos) Calavera Images and José Guadalupe Posada

### General Foundation

Mexican graphic artists José Guadalupe Posada (1852-1913) and Manuel Manilla (1830-1895?) created dozens of *calavera* (skeleton) images while employed (collectively, 1882-1913) by the Mexico City based printing house of Antonio Vanegas Arroyo (1852-1917). The images appeared in a variety of publications called broadsides (Figure 1). Also known as *hojas volantes*, literally “flying leaves”. The broadsides were an inexpensive form of publication (usually one to two pages) containing a variety of news, commentaries and entertainment popular in the time. During October and November, Vanegas Arroyo issued broadsides containing images of *calaveras* to coincide with the early November observance of the Day of the Dead. The *calavera* was not the invention of Vanegas Arroyo, Manilla or Posada, but there can be little doubt that they were the foundation of its popularization in the current century.



Figure 1 Broadside: Posada above Manilla below, note active vs. passive images.

The promotion of *calavera* imagery was very clearly in part due to the success of the aforementioned publishing house of Antonio Vanegas Arroyo. Without the combination of the art from Posada (mainly Posada) and Manilla, marketed by the savvy business skills of the founder, Antonio Vanegas Arroyo, it is arguable that the *calaveras* might not enjoy the widespread popularity that they have today.

This essay examines briefly the early use of the *calavera* in North and Central America, the imagery of *calaveras* in Europe, the origin of *Día de Muertos* (Day of the Dead), aspects of Posada’s relationship with Vanegas Arroyo, and finally reviews and speculation on how the *calavera* (and to some extent Day of the Dead) moved from the broadsides of the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> Centuries in Mexico toward an increasing popularity and into mainstream status well beyond Mexico in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century.

### Early Mesoamerican Uses of the Calavera

Skeletal images were used in pre-Columbian times by peoples living throughout wide areas in Mexico and portions of Central America. Some of the best known *calavera* images have been found and recorded from numerous Aztec and Mayan archeological sites including, but not limited to: *Teotihuacan*, *Templo Mayor* in Mexico City, *Chichen Itza* along Mexico’s Gulf Coast, Tikal in Northern Guatemala and Copan in Honduras. Development of what might be called the first cities with temples containing *calavera* imagery may be assigned at present to the Middle Pre-classic Period of about 1,000 to 300 BCE (Before Current Era). Examples of the oldest known *calavera* statuary in the region belong to the Olmec people who lived approximately 1,200 to 400 BCE.

Paleoanthropologists have studied the uses of *calaveras* for many years. The literature in terms of academic research papers and books on the subject is extensive and several publications are referenced here for further reading. A brief summary reviewing some of the main observations of Mesoamerican uses and symbolic meanings of *calavera* imagery is as follows:



Figure 2 Skull mask from human sacrifice, with shell eyes, Mexico.

1) as actual skulls, resulting from human sacrifice (Figure 2), the belief was that the human sacrifices fed the gods, which in turn would ensure continuity by allowing the Sun to rise and life to continue, 2) as sculpted symbols (Figure 3), *calaveras* might serve as markers or sign posts demonstrating respect to the gods while also signifying places



Figure 3 Stone skull possibly as a site marker, Mexico.

of ritual or of a sacred nature, 3) again as symbols, as reminders of Death's constant presence and the duality of life in that there can be no life without death, 4) where the skull racks of Mexico or *tzompantlis* are concerned (Figure 4), it is believed they served to remind the population of the day that obligations to the gods must be met and also as a symbol of power...the more skulls exhibited the more powerful were the people who put them there.



Figure 4 Tzompantlis from Jesuit missionary Juan de Tovar's 1587 manuscript (aka the Tovar Codex).

### Origins of Day of the Dead

Customs and traditions of people evolve and change over time. This is especially true when one culture is invaded and conquered or dominated by another. Where the Mesoamerican cultures are concerned, the Spanish invasion and conquest resulted in a blending of cultural traditions combining elements from the Catholic Church (the centuries old Judeo-Christian veneration of the dead on All Souls' Day) with Mesoamerican beliefs. The Spanish crown and Catholic Church, as the conquerors of Mexico had the dominant influence. There is no exact date when the cultures began to merge, but a general beginning might be assigned to the year of 1521 AD, coinciding with the general date of what is referred to as the "Conquest of Mexico". However, not all regions of Mexico were brought under Spanish rule that year and certainly the dismantling of native Mesoamerican cultures did not happen overnight. The changes evolved over many years. It might also be argued that the traditions of native Mesoamerican cultures were not dismantled but that they are evolved and continue to evolve.

In the years following 1521 AD, some general observations may be made. For example, European culture and Mesoamerican cultures had some elements in common and some clear differences. Both observed death with a view that took into account ancestors and an honoring of deceased souls. Both considered the journey of souls in the afterlife and both had times of observance specifically set aside during the calendar year. Mesoamerican cultures observed the time over a longer period and at a different time of the year, both cultures, nevertheless had times for observance. To this author, these are the main considerations providing the foundation helping the Spanish-Catholic Church exert dominance resulting in the gradual melding and adoption of the Day of the Dead period between October 31 and November 2. There were certainly also significant differences in belief systems (for example, Mesoamerican cultures were

polytheistic vs. the monotheistic Judeo-Christian system), but again, the similarities allowed for a gradual blending of cultures.

One other aspect of similarity worth consideration is the concept of what might be called spiritual layers. At the time of the conquest, the Aztec belief system included three main parts: the earth world inhabited by the living, an underworld, called Mictlan, inhabited by the dead and ruled over



Figure 5 Mictlanteculhctli god of the underworld dwells in Mictlan with his god wife Mictecacihuatl.

by Mictlanteculhctli god of the underworld (Figure 5) with his god wife Mictecacihuatl and the upper plane in the sky where only deities dwelt. Within the earth and netherworld were layers where souls, deities and mythical beings might travel.

By contrast, the Catholic Church had three main divisions or layers. It had heaven, hell and purgatory. Earth, although not perhaps an official level, might be considered a fourth layer and was inhabited by the living. Purgatory, beginning in the 14<sup>th</sup> Century and thanks to the popularity of *The Inferno*, a literary work by Italian poet Dante Alighieri (1265-1321), helped create a multitude of levels including limbo, which was the recognized by the Catholic Church (until a ruling in 2007 by Pope Benedict XVI, eliminated it). But limbo was a part of the Church's system of belief for over 800 years. So in terms of layers, both belief systems had main divisions and sub-layers occupied by souls, with God or Gods, angels and saints dwelling within them in one way or another.

To continue, as the Catholic Church began to evangelize the population of Mexico there was clear advantage in accommodation of existing beliefs (All Souls' Day, All Saints' Day and Day of the Dead). Giving respect and honor to ancestors were unifying elements. Everyone has ancestors and family, we all came from somewhere and all of us perish. There is also the universal question of what happens to us after we die? These common elements likely helped in the adaptation and evolution of the Day of the Dead. Elements of these systems drive and are of influence even today. To some extent they are likely partially responsible for the growing popularity of the Day of the Dead and ultimately Posada's *calavera* images.

### Posada, Manuel Manilla and Antonio Vanegas Arroyo

Antonio Vanegas Arroyo, as Posada's main publisher, played a significant role in developing the popularity of *calavera* imagery as related to the Day of the Dead in Mexico. Posada's predecessor at the printing house of Vanegas Arroyo was Manuel Manilla. He joined the printing house sometime around 1882 and left, it is believed around 1892. Manilla was at the Vanegas Arroyo printing house approximately seven years before Posada and it might be said that his images of *calaveras* tested the waters for how the images might be received in the market. Later, when Posada joined the artistic team his more frenetic or dynamic style brought the *calaveras* to life (see Figure 1). Manilla however, appears to be the first illustrator charged with producing the earliest *calavera* images for the Vanegas Arroyo publishing house but Posada generally gets the credit for their popularization.



Figure 6 1792 engraving with *calavera* by F.G. Bustamante

Where or how Vanegas Arroyo acquired the idea of using *calaveras* in his publications is difficult to establish. There are three elements that may singularly or severally have contributed to the inspiration of Vanegas Arroyo to use *calaveras*. First, elements to some extent might be traced back to the imagery seen in the book, *La portentosa vida de la muerte*, or *The Astounding Life of Death*, a Mexican written in 1792 by Franciscan priest, Joaquin Bolaños. The book contains



eighteen skeletal depictions by Mexican engraver Francisco Agüera Bustamante (Figure 6). Like Posada, Bustamante was a talented artist who contributed illustrations to a variety of 18th century books, but the *calavera* images contained in Bolaños's book are unique. Author Regina M. Marchi writes. Agüera himself may have drawn inspiration from European prints depicting the "Dance of Death".

Where Bustamante and Bolaños acquired their inspiration to utilize *calavera* images is unknown, but Marchi may be correct as it is certainly possible that they were influenced by art works of European origin.



Figure 7 Danse Macabre fresco in the Church of the Holy Trinity, Hrastovlje, 1490 AD by *Johannes de Castua*

Dating back as early as the 15th Century, European skeletal depictions appeared in murals (Figure 7) and later paintings. These images have been grouped by numerous authors into an allegorical category called the ***Danse Macabre*** (French for Dance of Death) and also into a related class of skeletal living-death imagery referenced in Latin as ***memento mori***. Ultimately, either term reminds us to reflect on death, that all living things die.

When reflecting on European skeletal designs, Hans Holbein the Younger (1497–1543) in a book actually entitled, *Danse Macabre*, utilized

skeletal imagery (Figure 8). The images were drawn by Hans Lützelburger and published in Lyon, France in 1538. Apparently, the images appearing in *Danse Macabre* were very popular. Like the images of Posada and Manilla, it might be argued that their very popularity lead to their widespread copying and distribution over the years following 1538, as the images, in many forms, have appeared throughout Europe.



Figure 8 *Danse Macabre*, by Hans Lützelburger, published in Lyon, France in 1538, contained skeletal images.

Could some of these or similar images have found their way into the hands of publishers and artists in Mexico? It is certainly possible, as literature was definitely exchanged between the Old and New Worlds. There are, for example, a variety of chapbooks published by Vanegas Arroyo that have their roots in the fables and tales of European literature. Looking at the stories contained in the Blue Fairy Book (published in 1889) compiled by Andrew Lang (1844-1912) one sees titles such as Blue Beard and Puss in Boots among others, all published by Vanegas Arroyo (with illustrations by Manilla and Posada).

In 1847, a short-lived weekly publication called *El Calavera* (Figure 9) appeared in Mexico. In this publication, the anonymously drawn images of *calaveras* were used symbolically to help communicate social, political and satirical commentary. Although Antonio Vanegas Arroyo did not



Figure 9 *El Calavera* 1847 showing mid-19<sup>th</sup> Century political use of *calaveras*.

start his publishing business until 1880, it would not be unreasonable to speculate that he may have drawn inspiration or gained the general idea regarding the utility of *calaveras* for social commentary from the *El Calavera*.

The Belgian artist James Ensor (1860-1949) also used skeletal images in satirical illustrations. During his lifetime he produced 133 etchings and drypoints, of which eighty-six were made between 1886 and 1891. Might some of the images have made it to the eyes of Vanegas Arroyo?

In addition to the 19<sup>th</sup> Century records of prints that have been noted so far, there are other examples of *calaveras* being used in Mexico during the latter portion of the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> Centuries, prior to what might be called the first radiation of their use (mainly from Manilla and Posada). Again, as mentioned previously, neither Manilla, Posada nor Vanegas Arroyo invented the use of the *calavera* but how it evolved in use during their time is an interesting study.

Manilla joined the printing house of Vanegas Arroyo around 1882. At that time, Posada was still living and working mainly in Leon, Guanajuato. Manilla had already created images of *calaveras* prior to Posada's arrival in 1888 and employ of Posada by Vanegas Arroyo beginning in 1889. The first known use of a *calavera* by Posada was not for Vanegas Arroyo but for Ireneo Paz's publication *La Patria Ilustrada* in 1889 (Figure 9). When Posada began to work with Vanegas Arroyo, Manilla had been at the printing house for about seven years. Posada was younger than Manilla by roughly twenty-two years. Manilla had a more traditional or classical in style. But as he was older, had a greater amount of experience and was in a senior position at the printing house, perhaps Posada's creative *calavera*-side did not fully emerge until after Manilla's departure.



Figure 10 Front cover *calavera* from *La Patria Ilustrada* 1889

This leads to the question of how much influence did Manilla or Vanegas Arroyo play in Posada's *calaveras*? And, where would the now famous satirical caricatures drawn by Posada in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> Centuries be without the editorial influence of Vanegas Arroyo or perhaps the example and guidance of the senior Manilla? There really can only be speculation at this point. But we do know a few things that may give some clues.

As mentioned, we know that *calaveras* had been used by Manuel Manilla while working for Vanegas Arroyo. We know that Posada had illustrated *calaveras* prior to working for Vanegas Arroyo. We also know that other publications that were active during Manilla and Posada's time had used *calavera* images, examples include: *La Patria Ilustrada*, *El Hijo del Ahuizote*, *El Buen Tono* and *El Comico*, to name a few among many. We know, thanks to the research of historian Dr. Helia Emma Bonilla Reyna that Posada made images to order as described in the documentation of a lawsuit where Posada sued an editor for non-payment. The interesting part of this is the editor's art request and description with resulting cartoon that Posada made to order.

If Posada made images to order per instruction from his editor(s), what did Vanegas Arroyo ask him to create and how much creative latitude was Posada allowed? How much back and forth was there between Posada and editor(s)? If the lawsuit uncovered by Dr. Bonilla is indicative of how Posada worked with his editors, perhaps the ideas came from the editors and Posada simply made the image to specifications. But then, maybe he had much greater freedom. Again, there is not enough evidence at this time to reach a conclusion with certainty.

In this brief exploration of Posada's *calavera* images there is unfortunately no certainty of a precise origin or evolutionary path for his *calaveras* but it can be said with certainty that the *calavera* imagery, signed and attributed to him, has been reproduced and repurposed for over one-hundred years, out-living his many editors. This is testimony to Posada's stature as an artist of influence and inspiration. Whatever notoriety Posada the artist enjoys today, is over-shadowed by the popularity of his beloved *calaveras* (note that Posada also illustrated books and many other images political and non-political) and yet the visibility of his name and imagery is due mainly to Posada's discovery and promotion in the 1920s and 1930s by artist Jean Charlot and acknowledgements from artists such as famed muralist Diego Rivera. Publications by Frances Toor (in *Mexican Folkways* and in the *POSADA Monografia*) and Anita Brenner (in *Idols Behind Altars*) were instrumental in promoting Posada's imagery. But with little doubt the widespread use of the *calavera* for political images created by the famed Mexican artists cooperative the *Taller Grafica Popular* in the 1930s and 1940s is very much responsible for helping to promote the utility of the *calavera* as a political vehicle.

### **The Popular Calaveras**

With Manilla, Posada, Vanegas Arroyo, the *Taller Grafica Popular* and so many others utilizing *calaveras*, one question remains...why is the *calavera* so popular?

Perhaps the answer is simply because each human being contains a *calavera*. However, even though present day representations of death in *calavera* form and accompanying traditions still contain some of the pre-Columbian uses or meanings held by indigenous peoples of Mexico such as the Aztecs, the imagery is fast evolving in the modern media dominated landscape. Although some beliefs have faded such as the lessening use of the images of Mictlantecuhтли and Mictecacihuatl (the god and goddess of the dead who presided over Mictlan, the realm of the dead), a variety of remembrances, offerings and feastings are still traditional. The question still remains...why is the *calavera* so popular?

A twofold answer is proposed here: 1) Population growth in the Mexican demographic with greater exposure/acceptance to Mexican culture, and 2) perhaps the most influential aspect, that it might simply be because each human being contains a *calavera*. Since the *calavera* is, in fact, something we all have in common it is relevant to everyone and accordingly may be used to convey messages. Over one-hundred years since Posada's death, the most reproduced and influential images of *calaveras* are those that he created. Posada and his publishers used depictions of *calaveras* to remind us of our collective mortality but also to shed light on a variety of areas involving human activities. His illustrations were often satirical caricatures uprooted from the current political climate, but they were also used to poke fun at our human condition. This use was evolutionary, occurring over time and the use is as applicable today as it was over one-hundred years ago.

There is an interesting dichotomy here. Images of death, borrowed from the ancient traditions of the indigenous Mexicas juxtaposed with the living though Posada's "cartoons". There is perhaps an inevitability where cultures and traditions collide... Western European Spanish Christian cultural view of death vis-à-vis the Conquest

versus the Mexicas poly-deity re-birth belief system. Somewhat simplistically, it could be said that the Mexicas provided the Spanish with the opportunity to get in touch with their "inner *calaveras*". So too for all of us living in the modern day. Life and death go hand in hand, one could not exist without the other and so that saying goes, "It takes two to tango," So why not incorporate the art into today's political imagery? Last, but not least is the engine of commercialization, blurring and borrowing the images and traditions of *Dia de Muertos* into Halloween and beyond, but that's a whole new discussion. *Viva Posada!*

**Calavera-** The word *calavera* as used here refers to the term skeleton or skull. In Mexico, the word can have many meanings and uses. The word *calaca* is generally used specifically to refer to the skeleton. But for simplicity only the word *calavera* is used here.

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